

Negro Hill: Remembering an African American Mining Town

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Negro Hill was once home to an interracial community built on a lucrative gold strike. Now submerged behind Folsom Dam, this town has been largely forgotten and even dismissed as a myth. And although Negro Hill seems to have been mostly peaceful in Gold Rush days, one violent incident created a news sensation, breaking the silence that has usually obscured the experiences of African Americans in early California. An examination of newspaper reports from the Gold Rush itself shows this community to have been very real, and presents a new vista of a period that appears in most imaginations as predominantly white.

The 1948 California Historical Society annual meeting featured a guest speaker named Rev. John W. Winkley, who recalled his decades of personal experience traveling and preaching throughout the California Gold country. His meander through dozens of mining camps was briefly summarized in the Society's journal. Winkley's findings were listed without critique, except for one prominent rebuttal inserted near the beginning of his talk:

In the American River country, the speaker has carefully explored the ruins of such towns as Mormon Island; Prairie City on Alder's Creek, whose only relics are wooden grave makers; Little Negro Hill, the site of which seems an incongruity to us and its story a hoax...¹

So what *was* the story of Negro Hill shared by Winkley, which the Society felt necessary to declare a hoax? The present research did not uncover the speaker's notes – if they ever existed – so we cannot discern exactly what claim was being purportedly debunked. However, an examination of newspapers from the 1850s reveals a mixed-race community that persisted for years at one of the earliest and richest placer gold strikes. Winkley was onto something.

The story of Negro Hill cannot be entirely a hoax; contemporary news accounts confirm that it was a bona fide mining town, located just across the South Fork of the American River

¹ "Meetings," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (March, 1948): 85, accessed October 11, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25156086>.

from the famously lucrative Mormon Island, in the westernmost part of El Dorado County. Negro Hill's racial makeup is less clear, but African Americans were striking gold in the area by early 1850, when the *Daily Alta California* reported, "About four miles below Mormon Island, on the American River, there have been new diggings discovered which prove to yield exceedingly well. They are called 'N...r Diggings,' from the fact that some colored gentlemen first discovered them."² Even so, the story of a mixed-race community at Negro Hill admittedly sits uncomfortably with most notions of the Gold Rush, in which predominantly white miners pushed aside a relatively small number of others to get at the best gold deposits.

The claim of hoax may also be specific, perhaps in reference to a pivotal moment in the life of this community – March 5, 1855. Two reports appeared in the *Sacramento Daily Union*:

A serious stabbing affair occurred at Negro Hill last evening, at the Tracy[']s] House, where a party of blacks and whites were playing at cards. Another party entered the room and commenced the disturbance, whereupon the whites turned against the blacks. A pistol was fired at Henry Bell, (colored,) who was afterward mortally stabbed in the left side near the heart. He was a peaceable man, and was stabbed without the slightest provocation.³

Monday evening last, there were present in a house or drinking saloon, kept by a negro named Jackson, four whites and three or four negroes, when a gang of rowdies came in drunk and noisy; after some words, one of them seized a bench, which was pulled away from him by one of his own party; in a moment he again seized and threw it at some negroes who were standing behind a table. At the same time, a negro by the name of Henry Bell, was stabbed between the sixth and seventh ribs, by one of the rowdies.⁴

These remarkable accounts, read carefully, reveal a bar run and patronized by African Americans – as well as at least a handful of whites on at least one occasion. Furthermore, the

² "The Placer – New Diggings," *Daily Alta California*, February 9, 1850. (OCR) I have opted to use ellipses where this racial slur is deployed. It should be noted that most references from the day mostly used "Negro," which was the site's correct name. The slur was common later, especially 1890-1920.

³ "Fatal Stabbing Affray," *Sacramento Daily Union*, March 7, 1855. Due to technical difficulties with the California Digital Newspaper Collection, most scan images were unavailable during the research and writing of this paper. The Covid-19 pandemic precluded any efforts to view specimens held by libraries. As a result, it was necessary to rely on the optical character recognition text for many citations in this report, identified with the notation "(OCR)." In some cases corrections are made; these are identified with brackets when it is not entirely clear that the interpretation is correct.

⁴ "The Negro Hill Affray," *Sacramento Daily Union*, March 13, 1855. (OCR)

latter account seems to identify three separate African American parties in addition to the barkeeper. Tracy's was an African American establishment in a town with at least a large minority of African Americans. For such a bar to continue as a going concern, it would need some combination of customers who were either African American themselves, or comfortable routinely buying drinks from an African American and consuming them in an integrated crowd. The reasons for the presence of the white card players is unclear, and the first account suggest that they may have had hostile inclinations that were brought to the surface by the arrival of their more belligerent peers. On the other hand, the latter account was a rebuttal to the former report.

The fate of Tracy's is unclear; it seems to have operated uneventfully before and after this day, as it apparently made no other appearances in newspapers of the time.⁵ But Bell's murder reverberated through the state. Governor John Bigler offered \$1,000 for the arrest and conviction of Bell's killers.⁶ Then, Bigler's Executive Department posted an official proclamation of the reward, which appeared in the *Daily Alta California* on April 5 and repeated through early August in multiple publications, from the *Shasta Courier* to the *San Joaquin Republican*.⁷ It is odd that one of the most powerful people in California would proclaim his support for an obscure murder victim who could neither vote for Bigler nor even testify if he had been a witness rather than a victim of this crime. There is little to indicate why Bigler would have offered a reward for Bell's murder, and then advertise it for months. Bell's only other brush with newsworthiness came three years earlier; he was accused of stealing \$40 from a barkeeper at the Mechanics' and Traders' Exchange in San Francisco, where he was a steward. He was

⁵ Searches for "Negro Hill" and "N...r Hill," as well as several other database queries in the California Digital Newspaper Collection yielded no additional results for Tracy's House.

⁶ "Mariposa Correspondence," *San Joaquin Republican*, April 1, 1855.

⁷ Based on searches of California Digital Newspaper collection.

released after the courts found “not a particle of evidence against” him.⁸ Bell was apparently a decent and unremarkable person, who was killed in a setting that reverses the racial expectations of the mythic all-white Gold Rush – where African Americans appear only fleetingly and lived in a subservient manner due to their lack of right to testify or vote: A Black-owned bar was assaulted by white outsiders, who then became fugitives pursued by the governor of the State of California. It is admittedly a somewhat incongruous tale.

Although the story of Negro Hill – and especially the death of Henry Bell – raises serious questions about race in the Gold Rush, there does not appear to be any academic work that focuses on this community or this incident. While Shirley Moore’s *Sweet Freedom’s Plains* tells the story of numerous African Americans on the American frontier – and even examines the family histories of the Gooches and Monroes, who were prominent in nearby Coloma – she does not identify any pioneers who settled or sojourned in Negro Hill.⁹ Most sources simply ignore the presence of African Americans, and there is certainly little room for an entire African American community in most mental images of the Gold Rush.

Erwin Gudde’s *Place Names of California* has a single entry for everything starting with “Negro; N...r.” He claims that such names were common, “not because there were large numbers of African Americans, but because the presence of a single one was sufficiently conspicuous to suggest calling a place Negro Bar or N...r Slide.”¹⁰ The assertion is unsupported, and Gudde does not explain why such a name would repeatedly stick based on a single miner, let alone one not responsible for the discovery. In contrast, Rudolph Lapp’s 1977 *Blacks in Gold Rush California* reveals a Gold Rush full of African Americans, who mined and lived in

⁸ “Law Courts,” *Daily Alta California*, February 14, 1852. (OCR)

⁹ Shirley Moore, *Sweet Freedom’s Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trails, 1841-1869* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 160-162.

¹⁰ Erwin Gudde, *California Place Names: the Origin and Etymology of Current Geographical Names*, 4th ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 258.

significant numbers at numerous locations. Lapp observes that names like Negro Hill “represent sites where a black man made a lucky strike or where groups of black men lived and mined.” He notes that by 1852 California was home to more than 2,000 African Americans, most of whom lived in the Gold Country, and notes extensive influence from New England abolitionists.

Lapp provides the most comprehensive account of Negro Hill found in the present research, although it is still unfortunately brief.¹¹ He describes Negro Hill as being “first mined by blacks in 1849...Digging in that area continued to prove rewarding, as new finds were being made into the following year.” Two years later, yet another strike “was felt by miners to insure that a long run of profit would follow.” Lapp describes a “Negro mining community...In 1852 two Massachusetts blacks opened a store and boardinghouse, around which a concentration of black residences grew up. Since the diggings continued to be sufficiently rewarding, the Negro Hill community continued to survive and was even stable enough to deserve the attentions of a minister.” By 1855, Lapp reports that Negro Hill had grown to about 400 residents, including Chinese and Portuguese, with “scores of hardy miners making good wages.”¹² However, 1855 was the year of Henry Bell’s murder, which Lapp frames as a high water mark. Although he does not provide a detailed analysis of Negro Hill’s decline, Lapp notes growing racism and observes that in the 1856 presidential election, only 22 percent of Negro Hill votes were cast for the antislavery candidate John Frémont – which Lapp attributes to demographic change. In contrast, he says, “blacks were never harassed” in nearby Massachusetts Flat.¹³

Negro Hill also appears fleetingly in the memoir *Fugitive Slave in the Gold Rush: Life and Adventures of James Williams*. The author employs an inconsistent style, varying from

¹¹ Lapp also wrote a pamphlet called *Negro Hill* in 1998, as part of a series of keepsakes published by the Book Club of California. It is held by CSUS Special Collections but was unfortunately not accessible due to Covid-19 restrictions during the period of research.

¹² Rudolph Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 51-2.

detailed word-by-word accounts of entire conversations to broad summaries that give only faint outlines of his travels. Unfortunately, Negro Hill receives the latter treatment: Williams claims to have spent six months in "Negro Hills," but says almost nothing about his time there – even though he went straight to Negro Hill upon arrival in California by sea, spending only a few days en route from San Francisco. Williams gives no hint how or when he learned of Negro Hill, only saying that it was the "first place I came to." It is curious that Williams did not find this place interesting enough to describe; a fugitive slave and Underground Railroad worker would presumably find half a year in an African American mining town worthy of description. Even stranger, he complains that he "made nothing but my board" during the boom times of May 1851 – yet when he left he was leading an equipped group, as evidenced by this statement: "I packed my rocker that we washed the gold with, my prospect-pan and my pick and shovel, and led the way."¹⁴ Williams is not telling us everything, and there is clearly a gap in his narrative.

It is worth noting that Williams used the plural, "Negro Hills." Indeed, research into the town of Negro Hill is complicated by other places sharing the name. The California Digital Newspaper Collection reveals references to Negro Hills near Mokelumne Hill and in Grass Valley, as well as in Shasta County, Santa Clara and Los Angeles. To further complicate matters, there was yet another Negro Hill in El Dorado County: In 1853, the *Alta California* reported that, "New and rich diggings have been discovered at a place called Negro Hill two miles east of Placerville."¹⁵ And a few months later the *Union* reported that, "On the summit of N...r Hill, above Placerville, is an immense reservoir...three and a half acres."¹⁶ Negro Hills were common.

¹⁴ James Williams, *Fugitive Slave in the Gold Rush: Life and Adventures of James Williams* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 22.

¹⁵ "San Joaquin News," *Daily Alta California*, February 28, 1853. (OCR)

¹⁶ "South Fork Canal," *Sacramento Daily Union*, May 28, 1853. (OCR)

The Negro Hill in question did not leave much trace in the secondary sources, but newspapers of the day provide us with three types of evidence regarding the size, stability and success of the community. First, a few population estimates and descriptions of the place survive. Second, numerous news accounts remarked on the “rich diggings” of Negro Hill and the efforts to tap that wealth by constructing ditches to bring water. Finally, transportation notices reveal Negro Hill to be a destination for stagecoach lines, and the town was mentioned prominently in travel-related arguments against moving the county seat.

Negro Hill seems to have had a population in the hundreds, for at least a few years during the 1850s. In addition to Lapp’s estimate of 400 residents in 1855, the *Union* printed a description in December of that year, which notes “nineteen families residing on the hill. There are three boarding houses, one provision store, two drinking establishments, one blacksmith shop and one livery stable. There is one school house or church, in which a day school is being taught.”¹⁷ All in all, the *Union* depicts a small but lively mining town, but is silent about racial characteristics. However, a description published by the *Alta* in early 1857 tucks a clue among mixed messages about the composition and vibrancy of the area: On the one hand it reports only 300 miners in the area including Negro Hill – a significant decline. On the other hand, interracial community is shown by a mention of “the saloon in town, owned by a darkey.”¹⁸ Even with the decline that seems to have happened from 1855 to 1857, the continued presence of an African American-owned saloon in the area raises questions about Lapp’s postmortem, and at the very least indicates one holdout in the retreat to the relative racial harmony of Massachusetts Flat.

The driving factor of community growth at this time was, of course, the presence of gold. And mining reports roughly confirm the trajectory suggested by the above descriptions. Early in

¹⁷ “Negro Hill,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, December 19, 1855. (OCR)

¹⁸ “Letter From Sacramento,” *Daily Alta California*, February 24, 1857. (OCR)

1852, the *Union* reported that “rich diggings have been recently discovered, which continue to pay handsomely.”¹⁹ The *Alta* soon added that, “two sailors took out the handsome sum of [\$3,500] above all expenses.”²⁰ Two years later Negro Hill was still “a good old mining locality...improving rapidly” with about 200 miners reportedly “making fair wages.”²¹ This continued improvement was dependent on water. Negro Hill was a dry diggings, perched above the water as its name suggests. So fully tapping the hill’s wealth would require construction of a canal. The first sign of such effort can be found in 1853, when a convention of ditch companies met in Sacramento; the Salmon Falls and Negro Hill Canal Co. was represented by Orlando Jennings, and reportedly capitalized at \$25,000.²² Although this was one of the smallest valuations listed among conventioners, the ditch was later completed. And by 1856 a proposed ditch on the Yuba River pinned its hopes on the investments of “Messrs. Jennings and Fraser, who had been highly successful in a similar enterprise at Negro Hill.”²³ Although mining at Negro Hill diminished after the 1850s, there was still gold to be found. In 1876, the *Placer Herald* reported a new ditch under construction, to take water 16 miles from near Auburn to Negro Hill, where there were “three or four hundred acres of gravel that they have thoroughly prospected and know to be rich.”²⁴ This ditch does not appear to have been completed, but the attempt shows that Negro Hill did not simply fade away for lack of mineral resources.

The plentiful and persistent gold of Negro Hill was a powerful attractant, and transportation notices indicate that regular stagecoach lines served the town for at least the mid-1850s. In November of 1854, the Rablin & Co. Express Stage began advertising a regular run,

¹⁹ “Negro Hill,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, January 14, 1852. (OCR)

²⁰ “Negro Hill,” *Daily Alta California*, February 1, 1852. (OCR)

²¹ “Negro Hill,” *San Joaquin Republican*, January 13, 1854.

²² “Convention of Water Companies,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, October 4, 1853. (OCR)

²³ “For the Nevada Journal,” *Nevada Journal*, March 7, 1856. (OCR)

²⁴ “Ditch and Mining Enterprise,” *Placer Herald*, August 26, 1876. (OCR)

thrice weekly, from Sacramento to Negro Hill – “the direct route for the Principal Bars on the American River.”²⁵ By early 1856, a daily stage line was running from Folsom.²⁶ In 1857, the Alta Express Co. introduced a daily express from Chico.²⁷ Getting to and from Negro Hill was also part of the political calculus of El Dorado County, as revealed during the contentious 1856 decision to relocate the county seat from Coloma to Placerville; the move would significantly increase in distance for many residents of the county. The *Georgetown News* listed seven communities that would be negatively impacted, and Negro Hill was among them.²⁸ The same list appeared in a follow-up article, which called them “all places of no little importance” and claimed that Negro Hill residents would face an additional twelve miles of travel.²⁹

Negro Hill was not a myth to be swatted away by a racist historical establishment. This was a real and relatively durable mining town. And contrary to Gudde’s implication that this was merely a place where a “single” Black miner happened to dig, Negro Hill was home to an African American community during much of the 1850s. It featured ample gold to drive economic development, and attracted enough people to support regular service from multiple stage lines over several years. Despite California’s generally poor treatment of African Americans, Negro Hill had a reasonably stable mixed-race population that was connected to the broader political community of El Dorado County – despite the disenfranchisement of African Americans. Negro Hill should therefore provoke historians to reexamine common assumptions about the racial makeup of the people who walked the dusty streets of the Gold Country.

²⁵ “Fare Reduced!” *Sacramento Daily Union*, November 22, 1854. (OCR) “Rablin” appears in at least 16 OCR records, suggesting accurate text capture despite a lack of independent confirmation of the name.

²⁶ “A Stage Depot,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, March 14, 1856. (OCR)

²⁷ “New Advertisements,” *Chico Record*, December 14, 1857. (OCR)

²⁸ “Removal of County Seat,” *Georgetown News*, February 21, 1856. (OCR)

²⁹ “Location of the County Seat,” *Georgetown News*, April 17, 1856. (OCR)